Between Punitive Policy and Restorative Practice: Policy Implementation in Tennessee's Disciplinary Alternative Schools

Hannah DeGuira

Dr. Cecilia Cerja

2025-2026 Gessell Fellowship in Social Ethics

Sewanee: The University of the South

April 2026

Introduction

There are 970,302 students enrolled in Tennessee public schools as of the 2024-2025 school year, and about one percent of the students are enrolled in alternative schools (Tennessee Department of Education 2025). In the 2023-2024 school year, 16,439 students were enrolled in alternative schools in Tennessee, compared to the 2022-2023 school year, when 14,899 students were enrolled in alternative schools, representing a 10% increase in enrollment (Tennessee Department of Education, 2025; Tennessee Department of Education, 2024).

The U.S. federal government defines alternative education as any "public elementary/secondary school that addresses the needs of students that typically cannot be met in regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special, or vocational education" (Porowski, O'Connor, and Luo 2014). The three categorizations of alternative schools are Type I, Type II, and Type III. Type II alternative schools are schools for students at the last step before expulsion due to behavioral issues, and Type III alternative schools are schools that pay special attention to academic, social, and emotional issues being faced by students (Lange and Sletten 2002). In contrast to Type II and Type III alternative schools, Type I alternative schools are vocational schools. While there are these 3 general categories of alternative schools, alternative education is constantly evolving, making their governance and the study of them very difficult (Lange and Sletten 2002).

In contrast to traditional schools, alternative schools generally offer smaller class sizes, flexibility, one-on-one interactions with teachers, create a supportive environment, and encourage sustainable student success (Lange and Sletten 2002). Such factors are effective strategies for preventing students from dropping out, which comprise a large part of the students

who attend alternative schools (Lange and Sletten 2002). Furthermore, small class sizes and individualized instruction are helpful in serving students with disabilities, another student group served by alternative schools. Groups of students who drop out and those with disabilities often overlap, as students with disabilities drop out at a higher rate than those without disabilities (Lange and Sletten 2002). In regard to behavioral issues, one study found that alternative school students report less disruptive behaviors by the end of the study compared to those at traditional schools (Lange and Sletten 2002). Students cited the flexibility of the alternative school as a key factor, as they were able to become more confident and comfortable in their role as a student (Lange and Sletten 2002).

There is no primary federal agency responsible for overseeing alternative education. While alternative education programs are mostly funded by state, local, and private funding, they may receive some funding from the federal government (Martin and Brand, 2006). This funding would come from the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act (Perkins), and the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) (Martin and Brand, 2006). The majority of U.S. states recognize the definition of alternative schooling as educational activities outside of the traditional K-12 curriculum; however, there are still key differences between states, revealing the complexity in how alternative education is governed (Porowski, O'Connor, and Luo 2014). Not having a universal definition of alternative education reveals "the fidelity of related policies and legislation, the diversity of contexts and settings, and the various groups of at-risk youth who may benefit from alternative education options" (Aron 2003, as cited in Porowski, O'Connor, and Luo 2014). This flexibility allows room for diversity of learning by state, but there is no national baseline for it. While this level of flexibility seems to increase the autonomy of state

educational policy, the lack of a federal baseline for these alternative schools complicates the implementation of policy.

NCLB, IDEA, Perkins, and the WIA pose issues to alternative schools as they have strict eligibility requirements, funding formulas, and overall invest less in secondary education. Strict eligibility rules prevent youth programs from participating, limiting funding that they can access, and the funding formulas bypass community-based providers, leading to perceived competition between public and alternative schools (Martin and Brand, 2006). While in some cases alternative schools and the local education system can collaborate to make decisions on funding, this varies by school system (Martin and Brand, 2006). Moreover, the federal government has more funding allocated for elementary and higher education than secondary education, the grade levels most often utilizing alternative schooling (Martin and Brand, 2006). Even if federal funding is allocated towards secondary education, there is no way to know how much, if any, is directed towards alternative education programs (Martin and Brand, 2006). Given the diverse array of alternative schools in the US public school system, the lack of a universal definition complicates federal oversight of the efficacy of alternative schools. As a result, there is little state or federal oversight and/ or research on alternative schools. Moreover, the alternative school data is limited, various alternative school programs exist within schools, and depending on the alternative school, students may be "attached" to their home schools, meaning they still receive funding through their home school.

Similarly, there is little research analyzing the academic outcomes of alternative school students. The little research that has been conducted yields varied results on the academic achievement of alternative school students, with some citing null outcomes and high recidivism rates while others report improved academic performance and positive student perceptions of

their alternative school experiences (Smith 2023). To address this gap in the research, I aim to understand how state and federal policies on alternative education are implemented at the local level. Specifically, I conducted a case study in Franklin County, TN, where I conducted semi-structured interviews with Franklin County School staff.

Despite the significant impact of alternative school education on students and the educational standards alternative schools are held to in Tennessee, little is known about the policies, political actors, funding structures, and standards that contribute to their outcomes in Tennessee. Using the Franklin County Alternative School that I visit each week as a case study for alternative schools in Tennessee, this qualitative research project will investigate the political and institutional dynamics that govern disciplinary alternative schools in Tennessee. Ultimately, I aim to answer these questions:

- How are state-level education policies implemented in alternative schools in Tennessee?
- What roles do alternative school teachers and administrators, district teachers and administrators, and school board members play in implementing education policies in alternative schools?
- How does Tennessee's state education policy affect the process of students being sent from their traditional schools to disciplinary alternative schools?

By answering these questions, I will be able to provide critical information about disciplinary education policy in Tennessee, which intersects with many other aspects of education policy in the state. In doing this, I aim to provide various policy suggestions that would better support Tennessee students and teachers.

Because alternative schools are governed at the state level, meaning their policies and definitions vary from state to state, I will be analyzing alternative schools in Tennessee.

Additionally, the support of the funds from the Gessell Fellowship is allowing the research to happen. The Gessell Fellowship is a fellowship in social ethics that allows students to study a local social ethics issue and propose a solution to it. Alternative schools raise ethics questions about how we treat students who misbehave. When students misbehave, how does our education system respond? I aim to answer this ethics question through a political science and policy lens.

Tennessee law requires that there must be at least one alternative school in each school district to serve suspended and expelled youth (Tennessee Department of Education). The governor has an alternative school advisory council of 10 members that meets quarterly to discuss any alternative school issues, curriculum, governance, and reports (Tennessee Department of Education). In 2023, the Tennessee state board of education began letting alternative school students participate in public virtual school (Tennessee Department of Education 2023). This same law also allowed alternative schools and programs to provide remote instruction to suspended and expelled students (Tennessee Department of Education, 2023). Because there is sparse literature on alternative schools in Tennessee, a review of the literature on comprehensive alternative school policy is needed.

Despite the significance of alternative schools, they have not been on the state's education policy agenda. Most of what has been discussed with the state's education policy has been charter school and school choice expansion, teacher shortages, and school safety reform (Aldrich 2024). Enacted in November, the Education Freedom Scholarship Act offered $7,075 to 20,000 students to attend private or homeschooling, significantly expanding Tennessee's school voucher program (Aldrich 2024). In the 2023-2024 school year, there were 4,000 teacher vacancies, illustrating the extreme teacher shortage the state is experiencing (Aldrich 2024). There has been a significant uptick in school shootings, notably with the Nashville Covenant

shooting that happened in 2023, which has pushed for action on gun violence and school safety (Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury 2023; Aldrich 2023). While these issues do hold value in education policy, alternative education intersects with all of these debates. Putting efforts towards discipline policy could address behavioral discipline problems, easing pressure on teachers, students, and school resources.

Literature Review

Scholars have typically studied alternative education on the national level as it relates to student behavior, effectiveness, health behaviors, populations of students of color and disabled students, and the school-to-prison pipeline. Alternative schools are stigmatized, as students who have attended them are labeled "bad" and their peers in traditional schools are labeled as well-behaved (McNulty and Roseboro 2009), but the policies that govern them are imperative and could save the futures of many students.

Alternative schools often target disadvantaged and marginalized students and those at risk of dropping out through their autonomy, student-centered environment, and clearly identifiable goals that inform evaluation and enrollment (Lange and Sletten 2022). More recent literature analyzes the effects of alternative schools on juvenile detention rates and the school-to-prison pipeline. There is very little literature studying alternative schools in Tennessee, which is the gap that I aim to fill. A literature review on the history of alternative schools, school disciplinary policies, exclusionary discipline, and challenges and disparities within alternative schools sets the foundation for my research.

The History of Alternative Schools

Alternative schooling has existed since the beginning of the American education system, with its most modern roots being found in the civil rights movement (Lange and Sletten 2002).

Alternative schooling began as a private effort to establish educational equity between white students and black students and evolved to a public effort to help all students with their personal learning needs. Created in the 1960s, the Freedom School Movement and the Free School Movement sought to oppose the racially oppressive education system. While the Freedom School Movement utilized community-based learning, the Free School Movement emphasized individual fulfillment (Lange and Sletten, 2002). Ultimately, both alternative education movements were "... designed to respond to a group that appears not to be optimally served by the regular program, and, consequently, have represented varying degrees of departure from standard school organization, programs and environments" (Lange and Sletten 2002). Such education movements provided educational opportunities to students who needed non-traditional methods of learning, setting the foundation for the educational philosophy that each student has different learning styles.

In the late 1960s, advocates supported public alternative schooling because students had varying learning needs. Open Schools prioritized student, parent, and teacher choice, learning pace autonomy, and a child-centered approach. Such schools were progressive, but they evolved to be more conservative and remedial due to the behavioral changes occurring in the 1980s (Young 1990, as cited in Lange and Sletten 2002). In the 1980s, more students were experiencing poor behavior and performance. Therefore, alternative schools began gearing their methods towards the behavioral correction of these students (Lange and Sletten, 2002).

Alternative School Policy

1996

Alternative school policies vary by state and have increased over time (Katsiyannis and Williams 1998; Lehr, Tan, and Ysseldyke 2009). Between the 1970s and the 1990s, roughly half

of the US (22 states) had legislation governing alternative education, and 20 states indicated having adopted a state definition of alternative education (Katsiyannis and Williams 1998). Despite the widespread adoption of legislation promoting alternative schools across the nation, there is still no universal definition of alternative schools. The variability in the definition of alternative schools allows each state to create policies that meet students where they are, but also creates barriers to other students receiving services (Katsiyannis and Williams 1998). Furthermore, the definitional variance in state legislation about alternative schools impacts the funding of alternative schools. The majority of alternative schools receive funding from local governments, with supplementary funding coming from state and federal governments. 89.5% of the states reported receiving local funds, 65.8% of states reported receiving state funds, and 60.5% reported receiving federal funds for alternative schools (Katsiyannis and Williams 1998). When asked about major strengths of alternative education programs, 95% of states responded with inadequate funding as a major barrier (Katsiyannis, 1998).

2002

To build upon the research of Katsiyannis and Williams, Lehr, Tan, and Ysseldyke (2009) conducted an updated analysis of alternative education program state policies. Researchers found that 48 states had some type of school legislation addressing alternative education, and 34 states had formal legislation having a definition for alternative education programs. There was a lack of consistency in defining alternative education, but there were 4 general criteria for student enrollment in alternative schools: meeting some form of at-risk criteria, being suspended or expelled from regular school, being disruptive in the general environment, and not achieving success in a traditional school setting. Moreover, 40% of states had formal legislation that did not

address funding, and there was no consistent funding mechanism across states for alternative schools.

Researchers found that across 18 states, there are 1 million alternative school students, which contrasts with the 613,000 students that the National Center for Education Statistics has reported. This underscores the scope of students being served by alternative schools and the importance of properly defining alternative schools. 94% of states' alternative settings serve secondary-level students, and 61% of states' alternative education settings serve students in first through fifth grades. 19 states reported having a system in place for documenting the alternative school student outcomes.

No Child Left Behind, Student Misbehavior, and Exclusionary Discipline

No Child Left Behind implemented zero-tolerance policies and a requirement for schools to have "highly qualified teachers," which ultimately left students who had committed disciplinary infractions with less support (Kennedy-Lewis 2014; Rosenberg, Sindelar, and Hardman 2004). Moreover, through the statutes required by No Child Left Behind, schools fell under accountability pressure, which led to increased student misbehavior (Holbein and Ladd 2017). No Child Left Behind was passed in 2001 in an effort to improve student test scores through universal performance-based accountability (Holbein and Ladd 2017). To measure school performance, schools are required to report test scores and attendance records (Holbein and Ladd 2017). Schools that fail twice consecutively to meet the performance thresholds put forth by the federal government are placed in a system of increasingly punitive sanctions (Holbein and Ladd 2017). In response to student misbehaviors, No Child Left Behind has propelled the use of "zero-tolerance policies," resulting in students being suspended or expelled for even minor disciplinary offenses (Kennedy-Lewis 2014).

Zero-tolerance policies are disciplinary policies that are “intended primarily as a method of sending a message that certain behaviors will not be tolerated, by punishing all offenses severely, no matter how minor” (Skiba and Knesting 2014). Zero tolerance policies became popular in schools with the passage of the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, which mandates a one-year expulsion for any student who is in possession of a firearm (Skiba and Knesting 2014). States have broadened the zero-tolerance regulations beyond mandates about weapons to include drugs, alcohol, fighting, threats, and other similar offenses (Skiba and Knesting 2014). 90% of U.S. public schools have zero tolerance policies for firearms, 87% and 88% have zero tolerance policies for alcohol and drugs, and 79% have zero tolerance policies for violence (Heaviside et al. 1998). Tennessee considers the following as zero-tolerance policies: (1) a student is in possession of a firearm on school property, (2) a student commits aggravated assault upon any teacher, principal, administrator, or other employee of a school or LEA, (3) a student is in unlawful possession of any drug or legend on school grounds or at a school- sponsored event (Tennessee Department of Education 2023). Recently, they amended the zero-tolerance offenses to add threatening mass violence on school property as a zero-tolerance offense (Tennessee Department of Education, 2023).

In her research, Kennedy-Lewis (2014) draws a distinction between the discourse of safety, one that calls for exclusionary discipline in an attempt to protect the group over the needs of an individual, and the discourse of equity, one that acknowledges each student’s set of social forces in creating unequal starting points for them, thus supporting children’s holistic needs. In examining states’ disciplinary policies, Kennedy-Lewis found that the majority of states’ legislation reflects the discourse of safety, with very few considering the needs and rights of accused students (Kennedy-Lewis 2014). Furthermore, only 20% of states discuss students’

rights to alternative education and continued services to meet their needs if removed from school (Kennedy Lewis 2014).

Exclusionary disciplinary practices disproportionately affect students of color and students with disabilities (Foley and Pang 2006; Welsh and Little 2018). Race is one of the most significant predictors of out-of-school suspension (OSS) regardless of behavior (Welsh and Little, 2018). Black students with low academic performance are more likely than Black students with high academic performance to be perceived as defiant (Staats 2014). Moreover, there is a contrast between the demographic makeup of students and the demographic makeup of teachers (Welsh and Little 2018). With the majority of teachers being middle-class white women and students being diverse, teacher biases may lead to a disproportionate number of Black students being referred for classroom defiance (Staats 2014).

NCLB, moreover, requires that all teachers must be "highly qualified," meaning that "teachers have subject matter competency in areas in which they are the primary instructor" (Rosenberg, Sindelar, and Hardman 2004). This additional teaching requirement shifts teaching focus from pedagogy to concept knowledge, bringing about concern for teachers' preparation for classroom management and managing disruptive behaviors. When it comes to special education teachers in particular, it was specified that teachers who do not instruct on any core subject or who only provide consultation to highly qualified teachers do not need to meet the same "highly qualified" competency requirements that apply under NCLB (Rosenberg, Sindelar, and Hardman 2004).

Since being placed under NCLB, schools have been experiencing what scholars describe as accountability pressure– pressure to improve student performance for fear of the government labeling the school as "failing." While accountability pressure has improved both test scores and

attendance, it has not led to improvements in non- academic factors, including disciplinary infractions (Holbein 2017). Schools face increased student misbehavior in association with increased accountability pressure, including drug possession, sexual behavior, fights, and disruptive behavior.

Challenges and Disparities in Alternative Programs

Because alternative schools lack a consistent definition and operate with a wide range of flexibility, they often face a lot of challenges, including a lack of access to services and resources and disparities amongst student groups. In Foley and Pang's study of Illinois's alternative programs, alternative school principals rated school access to physical education, library services, and science laboratory services as below average, with 40% of principals reporting that their programs did not have access to a library (Foley and Pang 2006). Furthermore, the most frequent community partner that alternative programs partner with is the juvenile justice system (Foley and Pang 2006). This lack of support is exacerbated in rural areas as "the number of students alternative programs serve is often not enough to substantiate a separate campus for alternative schooling" (Government Accountability Office, 2019, para. 23). Moreover, rural areas often lack knowledge of community partners and outside resources (Pettit, 2023). In her analysis, Pettit found that 5 out of 14 alternative schools reported not being able to enroll students during the last year because of a lack of resources. Participants also identified 3 areas for growth: School social work, collaboration, and program evaluation. I explore such patterns in the findings of my research, as the Franklin County Alternative School students experience a lack of support from the state of Tennessee. The community partners that the Franklin County Alternative School partners with have also experienced a lack of resources.

Methods

To best assess the implementation of state and federal policies, I conducted semi-structured interviews with educators, administrators, and elected officials within the Franklin County school system. Through my connections as a Canale site leader for the Franklin County Prevention Coalition, I was able to obtain the contact information of potential interview participants who worked for Franklin County Schools. In total, I contacted 12 individuals requesting interviews and was able to interview six individuals. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours, and participants received a $20 Amazon gift card as a token of appreciation for their time and insights.

I submitted my Institutional Review Board project proposal on June 6, 2025, and my project was approved on August 28th, 2025. I submitted my proposal, an informed consent form, and recruitment materials. I conducted interviews between October 23, 2025, and February, 2025. The interviews constituted minimal risks to the participants. In the appendix, I have attached the informed consent form, questionnaire, and recruitment materials (See Appendix A, B, and C).

After receiving consent from each participant, I audio-taped each interview. I then used a transcription service to transcribe the interviews. Interviews and interview transcripts were stored on a password-protected computer and in a password-protected folder. Interview recordings and transcripts will be deleted after the completion of my research. Each interviewee was anonymized and assigned a number, and the interviews and transcripts revealed the following themes: zero-tolerance policies, student vape and THC use, restorative discipline, the importance of student-teacher relationships, and positive perceptions of the alternative school. I highlighted phrases in the transcribed interviews, color-coding them to organize them into a designated

theme. After all transcribed interviews were highlighted and color-coded according to theme, I created lists of phrases that were categorized into each theme.

Analysis

Zero Tolerance Policies

Zero-tolerance policies have affected alternative school attendance, with drug use and vaping constituting the most common zero-tolerance infractions. Five out of six participants mentioned zero-tolerance policies when discussing the alternative school. Multiple infractions and zero-tolerance policies are key aspects of the Franklin County schools' code of conduct, illustrating the effect of federal policies on state and local education policies. The Franklin County Code of Conduct zero-tolerance offenses include:

- Bomb threats
- Being in unauthorized possession of a firearm on school property
- Unlawful possession of any drug, including any controlled substance, controlled substance analogue, or legend drug, on school grounds or at a school-sponsored event
- Aggravated assault
- Assault that results in bodily injury upon any teacher, principal, administrator, any other employee of the school, or school resource officer.
- Threats of mass violence on school property or at a school-related activity as determined by a threat assessment team.

According to one interview participant, the implementation of zero-tolerance policies has had a direct effect on the alternative school's enrollment. One interview participant noted a shift in the reasons for alternative school enrollment.

> That has not always been the case, and there's definitely been a shift... in the… reasons that we receive students. We used to receive students for multiple infractions, many

> different things. Students that were difficult to deal with in regular classroom situations are sent to the alternative school. Now basically we have mostly zero-tolerance kids. So just behavioral problems, we don't have as many of them as we used to. (Interview 1, Winchester, October 23, 2025).

They also noted that, due to this shift, alternative school enrollment has decreased in recent years. [1]

Nonetheless, as alternative school cases have shifted from being caused primarily by behavioral issues to zero-tolerance infractions, schools have largely been left to handle behavioral issues. In the case of Franklin County, I can deduce that teachers have experienced increased pressure, seeing as they have had to handle more behavioral issues in recent years. However, further research is needed to evaluate the extent of this pressure, the effects of it, and teacher experiences with it.

Vape and THC Use

Throughout my interviews, participants often mentioned nicotine and THC product use amongst youth in Franklin County. Four out of six participants reported THC and nicotine use being an issue among Franklin County youth. Considered a zero-tolerance infraction, I discovered that the majority of alternative students' cases can be attributed to nicotine and THC use on the property of their home school. When discussing student perceptions of the alternative school, one participant said:

> ...everything going on over there… Like vaping. Everybody's, I won't say it, but a lot of people's vaping. So you get sucked into it. Well, you're not going to get sucked into it [at the alternative school] because it's not allowed (Interview 1, Winchester, October 23, 2025).

---

[1] However, it is also worth mentioning the point of another interview participant who mentioned how the demographic cliff– the projected decrease in college-age students– is affecting enrollment, which could also explain an overall decrease in enrollment numbers Interview 6, Sewanee, February 11, 2026).

This interview revealed that some students may prefer the alternative school over their home school because it is quieter, allows them to do their work, and, as this participant said, is effective in keeping them out of trouble. It keeps them away from the temptation of vaping, a growing issue in Franklin County.

One participant highlighted a need for more support for students dealing with nicotine addiction and THC dependency,

> Well, I don't feel like we're finding any kind of substance misuse treatment for the students. And so you're not tackling the problem. And I'm going to use this as an example. If a judge has an alcoholic in front of him, and it happens throughout our whole judicial system all the time, and you don't find treatment for the alcoholic, and you send him to jail and you release him and he gets no treatment or services while he's incarcerated, and then when you turn him back to the street, of course, somebody's going to offer him that substance and he's going to, that cycle is going to reoccur. Well, same way with the juveniles. If they start out hitting a THC pen and they become addicted to it and we put them in alternative school, all we've done is they might not be able to hit that vape while they're at school, but I can assure you they're hitting it after hours. We're not actually fixing. It's like building a house. We're not actually building a stronger foundation for those children. We've not even begun to really address what the real issue is. The issue is the substance (Interview 5, January 2, 2026).

This participant points to a need for foundational support for alternative school students and students who are facing addiction. The Franklin County Prevention Coalition attempts to mitigate some of the challenges students may face regarding their substance abuse issues.

The Franklin County Prevention Coalition (FCPC) is a government-funded organization that aims to reduce youth substance abuse and violence in the county. The FCPC works with the Franklin County Alternative School to offer prevention programming and resources for students who may be struggling with substance misuse. While the FCPC is a valuable resource for alternative school students, it cannot fully address the root causes of students' substance use, given the limited time and resources available. The FCPC offers valuable resources, but has a wide group of students to address. Moreover, the BRIDGE program, an after-school program for at-risk youth that is run by FCPC, has lost its grant funding. Therefore, while these resources are

valuable, they should be adequately funded to further address the root issues of youth substance abuse.

In another interview, when I asked about the challenges that the alternative faces, the interview participant reported, “A lot of drug violations, a lot of the vapes, the DAP pins, weed pins, whatever kids are going through that, you know, with the THC. We catch a lot of that. And that's a zero-tolerance violation” (Interview 2, Winchester, October 23, 2025). This illustrates the saliency of THC and vape use for youth in Franklin County. In 2023, 21.6% of high school students reported vaping, compared to 10% of high school students who vape nationally. (Arzate 2025) 50.7% of Tennessee high school students obtained vaping devices by getting them from a sibling or friend, and 31.8% gave someone money to buy one for them. 23.1% report buying them from a store (Arzate 2025). In 2023, 30.3% of Tennessee high school students reported lifetime marijuana use compared to 29.5% of high school students nationally (Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth).

This issue not only proves an issue for the Alternative School, but also a disciplinary issue for all Franklin County schools. This also points to how zero-tolerance policies are used to address salient issues. Another participant noted how threats of mass violence and mass threats were added by the Tennessee state legislature to zero-tolerance offenses, reflecting the rise of threats of mass violence in schools. The same goes for drug and alcohol abuse– they have been identified as zero-tolerance abuses to address the growing saliency of the issue. One participant confirmed the increasing saliency of youth substance use and abuse:

> Yeah, I can remember when I first started almost eight years ago as a CASA. And it was very rare that you were, I mean, you had some juvenile substance misuse cases, but now looking this duration of things and the kind of work I do, and I don't know if it's because now I'm prevention focused and really seeing the substance misuse cases, but I feel like the needs are growing now. Because so many times you'll find, and I spoke to this earlier, that mental

> health and substance misuse run parallel to each other. And it seems to be the need for both is steadily growing in our county (Interview 5, January 2, 2026).

According to interviews, youth substance use and misuse and mental health issues have grown in Franklin County, contributing to juvenile caseloads.

Disciplinary and Teaching Philosophy

According to interview participants, the Franklin County Alternative School employs a restorative philosophy on teaching and discipline. When a student first arrives at the alternative school, their first assignment is to write a 250-word essay on what they did to be placed in the alternative school. According to one participant, this shows the student how to reflect on what they have done, how to accept responsibility for their actions, and what they are going to do to change their behavior. To assess students, students are evaluated every 20 days, when teachers meet with the student and the student's parents to discuss their progress.

Throughout my discussions, the topic of disciplinary philosophy was important to how Franklin County approached discipline cases. All participants mentioned restorative disciplinary practices as they relate to discipline cases and the alternative school. Participants explained how restorative practices are important to getting students back into mainstream society, facing natural consequences, having flexibility between discipline cases, and providing the necessary treatment to students while in an alternative school. This revealed how those working with students and specifically within disciplinary education see value in restoring students (allowing them to have second chances and understanding their circumstances) rather than punitively punishing them (a more limited view of discipline, disregarding their circumstances, and not giving them resources to get better). Moreover, the alternative school aims to foster a friendly and safe environment. One participant noted,

> I got this one old kid now that he's in a really bad situation in his home, but I keep trying to tell him he's 16 years old. So I'm just going to have to figure out how to not let it get

> you down. He comes in every day. He's angry. He can't come in angry. He can't come in and take it out on the teachers. He can't come in and defy it because when you walk through those doors, you got to realize this is a friendly place (Interview 1, Winchester, October 23, 2025).

The alternative school attempts to mitigate some of the challenges students may face regarding their academic success through reflection, teaching, and coping skills. Because the alternative school aims for students to reflect on their own behavior, takes a holistic approach in assessing student success, and responds to student behavior based on the root causes of it, it is fostering restorative disciplinary methods.

While the participant noted that the alternative school is currently employing restorative approaches, they also noted the profound impact of state and local policy and elected officials on the teaching and disciplinary philosophy of the alternative school,

> I mean, that varies from time to time. But there's many times I think we go through periods of time where we are, we have a restorative mentality of philosophy from state level right down to everybody. We want to do something with these kids. We want them back into the mainstream. Then from time to time we go through these periods of time where it's, hey, you know, you don't have time to do this. You don't have time to do that. What you need to do is... Sometimes, as I said earlier, you just lose them. You can't save everybody. So the number of you can't save everybody depends upon, again, the philosophy that comes down to the alternative school (Interview 1, Winchester, October 23, 2025).

The teaching and discipline philosophy of state and local government officials impacts the outcomes of alternative school students, as the policies that they prioritize influence the consequences that they will face.

The teaching philosophy of state officials or the director of schools impacts education policies that are made, which ultimately impact students in the classroom. Those who believe in more punitive disciplinary policies will pass on such policies, exposing alternative school students to punitive disciplinary policies. On the other hand, those who believe in restorative policies will pass such policies, exposing alternative students to restorative disciplinary policies.

This concept is validated by the experiences of another interview participant who speaks about personal philosophies and experiences affecting the policy agenda of the school board "And so, like I said, the code of conduct policy, some of the changes in there were sort of driven by school board members who wanted to see, again, more restorative practices instead of the deeply punitive ones" (Interview 3, Sewanee, November 4, 2025).

One local legislative change that pertains more broadly to disciplinary policy in Franklin County is a policy that school board members passed in 2023 that banned corporal punishment in the county. While still legal in Tennessee, this represents a shift for Franklin County towards more restorative disciplinary practices. One participant who has work experience in surrounding counties noted experiencing students receiving corporal punishment in school. While it did not occur often, it was still a very shocking experience for this participant. In comparing this county to Franklin County, they claimed that Franklin County had a more organized, effective, and constructive disciplinary process. While not an experience of Franklin County schools, it is a reflection of the disciplinary landscape of the broader Southern Middle Tennessee area. This raises questions about Franklin County serving as a motivator for surrounding counties to outlaw corporal punishment in schools as well.

Flexibility

The flexibility of the Franklin County Alternative School greatly impacts the implementation of state education policies. The Alternative School operates according to a logic of control, meaning it decreases misbehaviors, maintains safety, and minimizes disruptions. Students are at the Alternative School based on standards set forth by the Tennessee Code Annotated. Students are expected to complete the work assigned by their home schools and adhere to no vaping or drug use on school grounds.

The Franklin County Prevention Coalition also operates according to the logic of care, meaning it attends to individual needs, ensures emotional safety, and works to develop relationships and trust (Golann and Jones 2021). Students are required to write an essay when they first arrive at the school, the teachers and the administrators meet students where they are at academically and emotionally, and understand students' sources of trauma. Balancing control and care can send a more positive message to students that they are a valuable contribution to the environment and that they can exhibit better behavior (Golann and Jones 2021).

One interview participant noted the importance of such flexibility in the alternative school.

> You know, discipline has to be progressive. And, of course, it's a situational basis, you know, depending on the severity of what's going on. Of course, when I first started teaching, alternative schools were not very common. The district that I worked in eventually did have an alternative school. But... It is a good option because there are situations where kids don't function in the regular classroom setting. So that does work. Or there are situations where a kid messes up and something has to get done. They need to be removed for a period of time for a variety of reasons. Maybe even if it's just to kind of send the message, whether you think that's an ethical reason or not. I think that's a component. I also think that kids understand that that's not a placement that they want. They would rather be in the school with their friends. They would rather be able to participate in things at school. And so I don't know that they really like being at the alternative school (Interview 2, Winchester, October 23, 2025).

The same participant noted the importance of understanding that kids make mistakes and that mistakes should not prevent them from graduating. This participant notes that there may be various reasons for a student needing to go to an alternative school, and that, for any reason, it should be productive and beneficial for the student. Acknowledging the need for this flexibility and grace for students gives significance to the various needs of students. Another participant even described how they advocated for a bigger alternative school, one that expanded beyond just addressing behavioral problems. They point to several needs of students and why they might

need further accommodations, such as night school, half days, and work programs to teach students hard skills.

The Importance of Student-Teacher Relationships

Five out of six participants spoke about the importance of teacher-student relationships or building relationships with students in disciplinary cases. Forming relationships with students is important as it affirms their right to a quality education and improves their long-term behavior. Oftentimes, students in disciplinary cases do not want to be in an alternative school. However, when healthy relationships are formed between the students and the teachers, they feel supported and are more easily able to fulfill the educational requirements that they need to return to their home school. Moreover, when student-teacher relationships are formed, the support that students gain from them allows them to reflect on their behavior and turn it around. This makes it more likely for them to achieve long-term success in their behavior.

One participant noted that they believed that one of the biggest challenges that the alternative school faces is convincing students that their education matters, highlighting the significance of initially forming teacher-student relationships,

> The biggest challenge is by the time we get a student, many times they've made up their mind they don't like school. They're just turned off. And so our biggest challenge many times is to get them to realize and understand the importance of their high school education, how important it is for them to finish high school. That's the first bridge that we try to cross, more so than necessarily academics. We try to deal with the behavioral aspects and their future educational needs (Interview 1, Winchester, October 23, 2025).

Educators create these relationships and foster an environment where students care about their education. One participant noted how they would meet students where they were at when it came to reading exercises,

> And so for those kids, I would... especially those kids, I would try to have them finish and then come, and then I would try to find maybe two or three kind of key questions and ask them a lesson to kind of make them think about it more deeply or at least kind of make

> sure they were getting kind of the key things out of the lesson (Interview 6, Sewanee, February 11, 2026).

An interview participant also noted the importance of student perception of teachers and students' knowing that teachers are there for support:

> Although, you know, I would think that, you know, some of those kids needed something a lot more like it was at the alternative school in terms of, like, well, and also just the, you know, contact with a teacher. You know, you talk about regular stuff. They realize teachers are not the devil incarnate (Interview 6, Sewanee, February 11, 2026).

Teachers creating meaningful relationships with alternative students is important for students knowing that they are supported by their teachers.

Along with teacher-student relationships, it is also vital to consider the role of classroom management, as it establishes a healthy learning environment, respect between the student and teacher, and positive student behavior. One of the interview participants emphasized the importance of classroom management when reflecting on their own teacher training:

> I think, you know, we just, we taught, we learned how to handle our classrooms and we did things just out of, you know, talking to our mentors and talking to administration as far as how to deal with classroom situations. And we just didn't have serious issues back then when I was in the classroom (Interview 2, Winchester, October 23, 2025).

While handling disciplinary issues was previously an issue left to teachers and administrators, the growing seriousness of such issues has led to more measures needed to be taken to address the same issues.

They went on to explain that:

> It does. You know, classroom management is key. If you don't know how to manage your classroom, you're not going to be an effective teacher, no matter how much, you know, pedagogy you know, how much, you know, content you know, how, you know, strategies. are ineffective if your kids are running wild (Interview 2, October 23, 2025).

Both in traditional and alternative education, classroom management is important. Classroom management is key to preventing student misbehavior and alternative school enrollment, and it is also key in alternative schools to addressing and reversing misbehavior.

Bridging gaps with vulnerable kids and families is vital as well. One participant explained what bridging the gap and building those relationships means to them:

> With our bridge program, with some other programs, we've tried to actually have the providers come into the school setting and work with us or into the alternative school setting. The best thing you can do, or one of the only things I feel like I can do, is just build that relationship with that parent or caregiver to try to give them... the pat on the back or the encouragement to seek out those services once they're identified for them and then to try to help whether it's with a gas card or trying to arrange public transportation for them to be able to meet those needs of the children. So just bridging that gap to those barriers. That the children get what they need (Interview 5, Winchester, January 2, 2026).

This highlights that bridging the gap and building relationships with students also means going beyond the walls of the school. It involves partnering with community organizations and connecting families with much-needed resources. The BRIDGE program that this participant speaks about is an after-school program that was run by the Franklin County Prevention Coalition, an organization that aims to reduce youth substance abuse and violence in the county. The BRIDGE program often served alternative school students. Moreover, the Franklin County Prevention Coalition teaches weekly lessons to the Franklin County Alternative School students. One of the challenges that this participant noted for alternative students is that even when there are available resources, there is often trouble in getting alternative students and their families to them. Another participant echoed this point in saying:

> And maybe perhaps a philosophy within the schools that strongly recognizes that and is willing to meet with families, kids, families, et cetera, in a different environment on their own turf. One of the things I see in very rural communities is that a lot of times family members either can't or don't want to come to school, don't want to be a part. They're working hard just to buy food and keep the lights on. They weren't successful in school themselves. They don't want to come back to school. That's not a comfortable place. But having that staff professionals who were willing to say, hey, I'll cover hamburgers at McDonald's if you'll meet me there at six o'clock kind of thing that might be more comfortable to get that family support. Because if you can line up that family support, you can make a world of difference (Interview 4, Winchester, November 24, 2025).

Creating a healthy relationship between schools and families and meeting families where they are at is integral to offering support to families and their students. This is especially important for alternative school students and ensuring their future success.

Positive Perceptions of the Franklin County Alternative School and Alternative School Support

Participants generally had positive perceptions of the Franklin County Alternative School and alternative school support. Franklin County has an informal method of assessing alternative school effectiveness. As the county is small and only has one alternative school, it's easy for the director of the alternative school and the director of schools to have a direct line of communication. The assessment of the alternative school involves analyzing recidivism and the director of the alternative school having conversations with the director of schools, and in some cases, the deputy director of schools. Moreover, the Franklin County Alternative School approaches helping its students in a way to see "how many students they can save" (Interview 1, Winchester, October 23, 2025). If there are any complaints about the alternative school or parents do not want their child attending the alternative school, those complaints and cases can go before the local board of education, where they will review the complaints and cases. However, participants in my interviews revealed that there generally haven't been any complaints regarding the alternative school.

While Franklin County does not have a completely formal system of evaluating the alternative school, it is perceived to be successful,

> I think it's the recidivism is what we look at. And, you know, it's kind of, I don't know that we really do a study on that. I think, you know, we talk to Mr. Blackwell or whoever towards the end of the year and just, you know, ask for that data just to see, you know, how successful the program is (Interview 2, Winchester, October 23, 2025).

These informal conversations may work for a county like Franklin County, seeing as it is a smaller county and it's easy to have a direct line of communication. Perceived effectiveness of the alternative school comes out well. One participant noted:

> I think it's been, I think it's effective. You know, we don't see a lot of the kids returning. You know, they go over and they do their time. And most of them come back and they stay out of trouble. Or they're good about not getting caught, one or the other. That's not 100%. You know, we do have kids returning. And we also have gotten better when they come back to the school. providing them some services and supports when they get back there. The guidance office communicating with them, reaching out to them, having kind of a return to school meeting with the principal and somebody in the guidance office, checking on them periodically. And I do believe that helps them stay in their homeschool (Interview 2, Winchester, October 23, 2025).

Not only is the alternative effective, but according to the participant, students receive follow-up services to ensure continued success at their home schools. If residents of Franklin County do have a problem with the Alternative school, they can approach the school board about it, but participants noted that there are few reports of that. If there are any, it is likely that parents do not want their children to attend the alternative school in the first place, not that they have a specific issue with the school.

Again, because there is a direct line of communication between the director of the alternative school and the director of schools, deputy director, and the school is small, perceived support for the alternative school is good. One participant noted that while it can vary over time, according to the director of schools, "The support for the alternative school here is really pretty good. It's good." Moreover, another participant noted that as long as the alternative school has two teachers, then it's well-supported. Interviews additionally revealed that some students surprisingly like the alternative school, and it is helpful in getting students back on track academically. One participant noted,

> And let me tell you something that bothers me in a way. Kids come up and they like it sometimes. It's less hustle. It's less drama. You know? And they say, man, I don't mind over here. It's quiet. It's quiet. I can do my work. No, no, no. You need to be over there. That's where high school is. This is high school. I mean, not really. It is, but it's not. You need to be over there where the fun is. It's no fun over here. You're going to sit behind that computer seven, eight hours a day and do your work (Interview 1, Winchester, October 23, 2025).

Students sometimes prefer the quietness and drama-free environment of the alternative school to their home school, pointing to vastly different experiences that students are having in school currently than when their teachers were in school. While the alternative school aims to provide a supportive and active environment for students, its ultimate goal is to integrate students back into their home school and to help them see the benefits of attending school.

Limitations

Interviewing educators, administrators, and school board members provides researchers with information that quantitative research alone cannot provide. Such research provides researchers with lived experiences, which contextualize data and provide information on how state and federal policies impact the work of educators and the lives of students. Despite the importance of the context and holistic view that this qualitative study provides, there were various limitations to this study. Limitations of this study include limited data on alternative schools in Tennessee, a limited participant population, and limited studies on alternative schools.

There is very little data concerning alternative schools in Tennessee. While the Tennessee Department of Education releases an “Alternative Education” report each year, such reports only include data on the population of alternative school students, reasons for alternative school enrollment, and the available staff at alternative schools. Tennessee Alternative School reports do not include test scores, recidivism rates, or any measure of the effectiveness of alternative schools. Additionally, while Tennessee releases a “report card” each year that has data on student

test scores, data for various alternative schools is missing. Moreover, many alternative programs reside within schools, and other alternative schools have their students remain "attached" to their home schools, leaving some alternative schools and programs to not be distinguished from traditional public schools.

I work for the Franklin County Prevention Coalition, which has allowed me to obtain the contact information of various educators, administrators, and school board members in Franklin County. This connection allowed me to more easily conduct this research and conduct interviews with 6 individuals. However, to obtain a more complete understanding of the experiences of Franklin County educators, administrators, and school board members with the alternative school, a more expansive interview study would need to be conducted. Those whom I interviewed offered valuable information, but may only represent some of the perspectives on the Franklin County Alternative School and how state and federal education policies are implemented in Franklin County.

There are very few studies on alternative schools and policy implementation. While the studies of Katsiyannis and Williams and Lehr, Tan, and Ysseldyke analyzed alternative school policies by state, these studies were the only national examinations of state alternative school policies. Moreover, such studies utilized data from 1996 and 2002, pointing to the need for a study on current alternative school policies.

Future Directions

While this study reveals the impact of zero-tolerance policies, flexibility and disciplinary philosophies, teacher-student relationships, and local support on the Franklin County Alternative School, it also points to various future directions for research. Findings point to further research on substance use and alternative school enrollment, the reasons for enrollment changes in

alternative schools, alternative schools in other Tennessee counties, and the politics of alternative schools in other states. Given that youth substance use is a growing issue nationally and a zero-tolerance policy, its relationship to alternative school enrollment should be analyzed. This points to a greater potential area of research in analyzing alternative school enrollment trends. While zero-tolerance policies have significantly impacted alternative schools, one interview participant noted that enrollment changes could be due to the "demographic cliff." Further research must be conducted to verify why such changes in enrollment are occurring. Given that this study drew on experiences from educators and administrators from one county, more research, including other Tennessee counties, is needed to analyze all Tennessee educator and administrator experiences with implementing alternative school policy. This also points to further research on other states' alternative school policies. As states function as laboratories of democracy, further research on states' alternative school policies could provide recommendations for necessary alternative school reform in other states. Additionally, given that there is a lack of data on Tennessee alternative schools, the state should establish a database with a list of alternative schools and programs and their test scores and recidivism. Such data will allow researchers to further analyze the politics of Tennessee alternative schools.

Conclusion

Through semi-structured interviews with educators, administrators, and school board members, I conducted a case study of the alternative school in Franklin County, TN. Findings reveal that disciplinary alternative schools, especially in rural areas, experience flexibility in alternative school policy implementation, are significantly impacted by zero-tolerance policies, and benefit from strengthening student-teacher relationships and community partnerships. On the other hand, alternative schools also need more state and federal support to address the root

causes of student misbehavior and to support the community organizations that partner with alternative schools. In fulfilling the mission of the Gessell Fellowship, I recommend the establishment of dedicated and equitable funding for alternative schools, expanded data collection and transparency around alternative school outcomes, and the implementation of restorative disciplinary practices within alternative schools. Such solutions will increase the necessary support for alternative schools, establish fair alternative school standards for Tennessee students, and allow researchers to further analyze alternative schools in the state. Increasing support for Tennessee alternative schools and the research of these schools ultimately ensures that all students in the state receive a quality education and the opportunity to thrive despite their circumstances.

References

Aldrich, Marta W. 2024. “Key Education Issues to Watch as Tennessee Lawmakers Return to Nashville.” *Chalkbeat*. https://www.chalkbeat.org/tennessee/2024/01/08/legislative-preview-tennessee-general-assembly-2024-school-vouchers-safety/ (October 4, 2025).

Arzate, Jennifer. 2025. *A Breath of Fresh Air: Reducing Youth Vaping in Tennessee*. Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations.

Dugger, Janice M., and Chester W. Dugger. 1998. “An Evaluation of a Successful Alternative High School.” *The High School Journal* 81(4): 218–28.

Foley, Regina M, and Lan-Sze Pang. 2006. “Alternative Education Programs: Program and Student Characteristics.” *The High School Journal* 89(3): 10–21.

Golann, Joanne, and Ashley Jones. 2021. “How Principals Balance Control and Care in Urban School Discipline.” 59(1). doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/00420859211046824.

Heaviside, S., Rowand, C., Williams, C., & Farris, E. (1998). Violence and disctpline problems in U.S. public schools: 1996-97. (NCES 98-030). Washington, DC: U.S.Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

Holbein, John B., and Helen F. Ladd. 2017. “Accountability Pressure: Regression Discontinuity Estimates of How No Child Left Behind Influenced Student Behavior.” Economics of Education Review 58: 55–67. doi:10.1016/j.econedurev.2017.03.005.

Katsiyannis, Antonis, and Brenda Williams. 1998. “A National Survey of State Initiatives on Alternative Education.” Remedial and Special Education 19(5): 276–84. doi:10.1177/074193259801900503.

Kennedy-Lewis, Brianna L. 2014. “Using Critical Policy Analysis to Examine Competing

Discourses in Zero Tolerance Legislation: Do We Really Want to Leave No Child Behind?" *Journal of Education Policy* 29(2): 165–94. doi:10.1080/02680939.2013.800911.

Lange, Cheryl M. and Sletten, Sandra J. 2002. Alternative Education: A Brief History and Research Synthesis. ERIC.

Lehr, Camilla A., Chee Soon Tan, and Jim Ysseldyke. 2009. "Alternative Schools: A Synthesis of State-Level Policy and Research." *Remedial and Special Education* 30(1): 19–32. doi:10.1177/0741932508315645.

Lehr, Camilla A., and Cheryl M. Lange. 2003. "Alternative Schools Serving Students with and without Disabilities: What Are the Current Issues and Challenges?" *Preventing School Failure* 47(2): 59–65.

Liu, Jessica, Shivani Mathur Gaiha, and Bonnie Halpern-Felsher. 2022. "School-Based Programs to Prevent Adolescent e-Cigarette Use: A Report Card." *Current problems in pediatric and adolescent health care* 52(6): 101204. doi:10.1016/j.cppeds.2022.101204.

Martin, Nancy, and Betsy Brand. "Federal, State, and Local Roles Supporting Alternative Education."

McNulty, Carol, and Donyell Roseboro. 2009. "'I'm Not Really That Bad': Alternative School Students, Stigma, and Identity Politics." 42(4). doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/10665680903266520.

Morgan, John G. 2003. *Zero Tolerance in Tennessee Schools: An Update*. Nashville, TN: U.S. Department of Education. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED481971.pdf.

Obermiller, Brinn, Karen Ball, Bryan Douglas, Joe Matheny, Jay Stetzel, Lisa Woods, Momodou

Keita, et al. 2023. *Annual Alternative Education Report*. Nashville, TN: Tennessee Department of Education.

Obermiller, Brinn, Karen Ball, Bryan Douglas, Joe Matheny, Jay Stetzel, Lisa Woods, Momodou Keita, et al. 2024. *Annual Alternative Education Report*. Nashville, TN: Tennessee Department of Education.

"Our History: AE & NE in TN." http://the-taea.org/custpage.cfm?sec_id=111849 (June 14, 2025).

Pettit, Trina. 2023. "Addressing the Need for an Alternative Education Networking in Rural School Districts." *Impacting Education: Journal on Transforming Professional Practice* 8(1): 27–36. doi:10.5195/ie.2023.231.

Porowski, Allan, Rosemarie O'Conner, and Jia Lisa Luo. "How Do States Define Alternative Education?"

Rosenberg, Michael S., Paul T. Sindelar, and Michael L Hardman. 2004. "Preparing Highly Qualified Teachers for Students with Emotional or Behavioral Disorders: The Impact of NCLB and IDEA." *Behavioral Disorders* 29(3): 266–78. doi:10.1177/019874290402900308.

Skiba, Russell J., and Kimberly Knesting. 2001. "Zero Tolerance, Zero Evidence: An Analysis Of School Disciplinary Practice." *New Directions for Youth Development* 2001(92): 17–43. doi:10.1002/yd.23320019204.

Smith, Shelby L., Margaret Dawson-Amoah, Tong Tong, Nicolas Pardo, Elizabeth Ann Alonso-Morris, and Adam Kho. 2023. "Public School Choice Options in the United States." *Encyclopedia* 4(1): 60–78. doi:10.3390/encyclopedia4010006.

Staats, Cheryl. *Implicit Racial Bias and School Discipline Disparities*. Kirwan Institute, May

2014.

Tennessee Department of Education, Office of General Counsel. *Reminder of New Zero Tolerance Offense*. Tennessee Department of Education, 24 July 2023.

"Tennessee School Report Cards | State of Tennessee | About The State." https://tdepublicschools.ondemand.sas.com/state (March 18, 2026).

Welsh, Richard O., and Shafiqua Little. 2018. "The School Discipline Dilemma: A Comprehensive Review of Disparities and Alternative Approaches." *Review of Educational Research* 88(5): 752–94. doi:10.3102/0034654318791582.

Wilkerson, Kimber, Kemal Afacan, Aaron Perzigian, Whitney Justin, and Jenna Lequia. 2016. "Behavior-Focused Alternative Schools: Impact on Student Outcomes." *Behavioral Disorders* 41(2): 81–94. doi:10.17988/0198-7429-41.2.81.

Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

The Politics of Alternative Schools in Tennessee

Investigator(s):Hannah DeGuira
Politics Department, 615-788-8799,

deguihr0@sewanee.edu

Introduction

You are being asked to be in a research study of the political factors that govern alternative schools in Tennessee.
You were selected as a participant because of the role you play as an educator, administrator, and/or school board member. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to participate.

Purpose of Study

This research is being conducted for the purpose of fulfilling my political science honors thesis. The purpose of the study is to understand why alternative schools operate the way that they do in Tennessee. I seek to understand the funding formulas, state policies, and key factors that affect the curriculum and disciplinary actions of Tennessee alternative schools.

Description of the Study Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: Participate in an interview where I will ask you questions about your experiences in the role that you play in the Franklin County school system. These questions will focus on the Franklin County Alternative School, challenges in working with students, and school implementation of state-level education policies. These interviews can be in-person or virtual over Zoom.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study

The study has the following risks. Because this topic involves sensitive issues that students face that lead them to be placed in alternative education settings, this interview may bring about some mild emotional discomfort.

Benefits of Being in the Study

While there are no direct benefits to participating in this study, this research will provide further information on the operations of alternative schools in Tennessee. This information could provide a deeper understanding of the challenges that alternative schools face in Tennessee, giving educators, administrators, and school board members key insights on structural reforms to improve educational practices and outcomes.

Confidentiality

This study is anonymous. We will not be collecting or retaining any information about your identity. The records of this study will be kept confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password-protected file. Recordings of the interviews will be kept on a password-protected laptop and made only accessible to the principal investigator. These recordings will be erased following the completion of this research process. We will not include any information in any report that would make it possible to identify you.

Payments

You will receive the following payment/reimbursement: You will receive a $20 Amazon gift card immediately after participating in the interview. If you choose to withdraw from the study, you will still be given a gift card.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time without affecting your relationship with the investigators of this study or The University of the South.
Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely from the study at any point during the process; additionally, you have the right to request that the researcher not use any of your study material.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, **Hannah DeGuira** at **deguihr0@sewanee.edu**. If you like, a summary of the results of the study will be sent to you.

If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigators or if you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you may contact Dr. Al Bardi, IRB Chair, at cabardi@sewanee.edu.

Consent

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, that you have read and understood the information provided above, and that you are at least 18 years of age. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant:

_____ Date:_____

Signature of Investigator(s):

_____

_____ Date: _____

……
…….

a. I agree to be [audio or video] taped for this interview:

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant:

_____ Date:_____

Signature of Investigator(s):

_____

_____

Date: _____

b. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped:

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant:

_____ Date:_____

Signature of Investigator(s):

_____

_____ Date: _____

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1) What is your job title? How long have you worked in this position and what brought you to work in this position?
2) How many years of experience do you have in education, particularly in roles involving student discipline?
3) What policies determine which students are placed in the Alternative School?
4) From your perspective, what kinds of situations or needs usually lead to a student being referred to the Alternative School?
5) What are the biggest challenges in working with students at the Alternative School?How do you and your colleagues try to address those challenges?
6) How are funding and staffing decisions made for alternative schools?
7) How would you describe the level of resources and staffing support at your school? Do you feel your school has enough staff and funding to meet students' needs? Have you seen funding or staffing levels change over time?
8) What role does the school board play in disciplinary placement decisions?
9) How do state or district policies influence your day-to-day operations? Have you noticed any recent changes in district or state policies that have affected your work?

Appendix C

Recruitment Email

Hello _____,

I hope that this email finds you well. I'm Hannah DeGuira, a senior political science major at Sewanee: The University of the South with a focus in education policy. Since my freshman year, I have worked with the Franklin County Prevention Coalition, teaching weekly lessons at the Franklin County Alternative School, assisting with research on prevention-related topics, and helping plan prevention events on Sewanee's campus.

For my politics honors thesis, I am researching how Tennessee education policy affects alternative schools in the state, using the Franklin County alternative school as a case study. To deepen my understanding, I am reaching out to ask if you would be willing to participate in an interview. The 30-45 minute conversation would focus on your role, your experiences within the school system, school operations, available supports, and school discipline policy. As a token of appreciation for your participation, you'll receive a $20 Amazon gift card.

I would be happy to meet at your convenience, either in person or via Zoom. Please let me know if you are interested or if you have any questions– I would greatly value your insights. I appreciate your time and consideration.

Warmest regards,

Hannah DeGuira